

COMMUNITY

As ICE presence grows, Allentown artists find their voice at gallery show



By Jai Smith

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Brandon Wunder, director and co-founder of the Alternative Gallery, poses in front of an art piece at "Icebreaker" in Allentown, Pa., Wednesday, Feb. 18, 2026. (Jai Smith/Lehigh Daily)

ALLENTOWN, Pa. — Magnus Mateo stood before a crowded room inside a former cigar factory on Fourth Street on Wednesday night and repeated a single line between stanzas of a spoken-word poem.

"I am not a dire threat to the American way of life."

The refrain ran throughout the piece at "ICE BREAKER," an art show organized at the Alternative Gallery in Allentown. The event drew visual artists, poets, zine makers and dozens of community members.

The show came together, organizers said, because no other arts organization in the Lehigh Valley was willing to publicly address what many in the room described as a growing climate of fear. Allentown is a city of roughly 125,000 residents, where more than half are Hispanic or Latino, according to U.S. Census data.

A year ago, City Council unanimously passed a "Welcoming City" ordinance directing city officials and police not to collaborate with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement unless required by law. Several attendees said they worry the designation makes the city a target.



A painting titled "Lullaby Baby" by artist KONI is displayed at "ICE BREAKER," a political art show at the Alternative Gallery in Allentown, Pa., Wednesday, Feb. 18, 2026. (Jai Smith/Lehigh Daily)

“It was the bubbling over of artists who were very upset that arts organizations locally weren’t taking a stance publicly,” said Brandon Wunder, the gallery’s director and a co-founder. “We’re willing to take that risk.”

Wunder, who has led the volunteer-run nonprofit for nearly 14 years, named ArtsQuest, the Lehigh Valley’s largest arts organization, saying it has “the resources to change the world and they choose not to.”

The Alternative Gallery operates on a different model. The organization maintains a building it does not own through sweat equity — cleaning, snow removal, maintenance — in exchange for rent-free space. It offers subsidized studios to artists and hosts free programming, including children’s art classes and a monthly crafting group called Connected by Craft, which has been running for over a year.

“We’re all volunteers here,” Wunder said. “We’re trying to create opportunities for artists, not make money off of artists.”

But Wednesday’s event went beyond the gallery’s usual mission. Wunder said multiple attendees told him they had been given the gallery’s phone number — and his personal number — as a resource in case of encounters with Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

“We have artists who are involved that have immigrated to this country, and they’re terrified,” he said. “They know that the Alternative Gallery can be a shield for them, and you’re damn right we’re gonna be a shield.”

Marissa Echevarria organized the event alongside their partner, Jay Echevarria, and Wunder. Echevarria, who moved to Allentown in 2020, works in mental health care coordination, helping Medicaid recipients connect with doctors, resources and support services. They previously did community outreach for a Suboxone clinic.



Know-your-rights materials in English and Spanish are displayed at the entrance of "ICE BREAKER," a political art show at the Alternative Gallery in Allentown, Pa., Wednesday, Feb. 18, 2026. (Jai Smith/Lehigh Daily)

"I just really wanted to have a show to amplify the voices of artists in the area, especially those who have been speaking out," Echevarria said. "With Allentown, we are a little bit of a target. We're a sanctuary city. The population we have right now is definitely targeted by ICE."

What began as a small art event, they said, grew rapidly once word spread on social media. The interest surprised them, but the reason behind it did not.

"The reason this has gotten so big is because no one else is speaking up," they said. "None of the other art organizations are speaking up."

The event featured a documentary video essay tracing a century of immigration policy and mass deportation leading up to ICE, visual art from several local artists, a zine-making station stocked with community resources, cloth mending, and sticker and patch making.

A resource table near the entrance offered know-your-rights materials in English and Spanish, stickers, educational handouts and a donation station where attendees could contribute to local organizations. Echevarria's Connected by Craft supplied art materials for the evening.



A projected still from a documentary video essay shows a historical newspaper headline during "ICE BREAKER," a political art show at the Alternative Gallery in Allentown, Pa., Wednesday, Feb. 18, 2026. (Jai Smith/Lehigh Daily)

Among the visual artists was Genesis Rodriguez, a lifelong Allentown resident who displayed a vibrant oil pastel depicting a vejigante — a costumed figure from Puerto Rican festivals historically used to frighten people into attending church. The figure has since been reclaimed as a symbol of resilience and cultural pride.

"I use the vejigante figure to kind of just show how Puerto Ricans right now should be using their voice and their privilege as American citizens to be talking about everything going on," Rodriguez said.

Rodriguez, who is Puerto Rican and Dominican, said she grew up in Allentown without learning Spanish, leaving her feeling “a bit removed” from her culture. But she said that has not kept her from speaking out.

“Just because I am Americanized does not mean that I shouldn’t use my voice to speak about everything going on,” she said.



Artist Genesis Rodriguez poses next to her oil pastel depicting a vejigante, a figure from Puerto Rican festival tradition, at “ICE BREAKER” in Allentown, Pa., Wednesday, Feb. 18, 2026. (Jai Smith/Lehigh Daily)

Rodriguez attended the Arts Academy Charter Middle School and graduated from Lehigh Valley Charter High School for the Arts in Bethlehem, where she received daily studio training for roughly a decade. She now works at the Allentown Art Museum, leading artist workshops. She said events like ICE BREAKER fill a gap she has observed in her community.

“A lot of people are not openly speaking about what’s going on,” she said. “They’re sharing out resources and information, but they’re not necessarily sitting down having conversations.”

Magnus Mateo was the evening's featured poet. Mateo, who uses they/he/she pronouns, performed two original pieces that addressed race, disability, queerness and politics. The room was quiet as they read.

In one poem, Mateo addressed the fear of being racially profiled by ICE agents: "My Spanish name on my birth certificate ... my brown skin tinted further by the summer sun. My frizzy crown of curls bouncing into view before anything else. This is enough for ICE agents to kidnap me off the streets."



Poet Magnus Mateo performs at "ICE BREAKER," a political art show at the Alternative Gallery in Allentown, Pa., Wednesday, Feb. 18, 2026. (Jai Smith/Lehigh Daily)

In another, they called on listeners to take concrete action: warn communities of ICE activity, boost mutual aid calls, serve in soup kitchens, support public libraries and take to the streets.

Mateo, whose mother was born in Puerto Rico, has been performing poetry in the Lehigh Valley for several years and described themselves as a “grassroots girly.” They are autistic and addressed recent rhetoric from federal officials about people with disabilities in their performance.

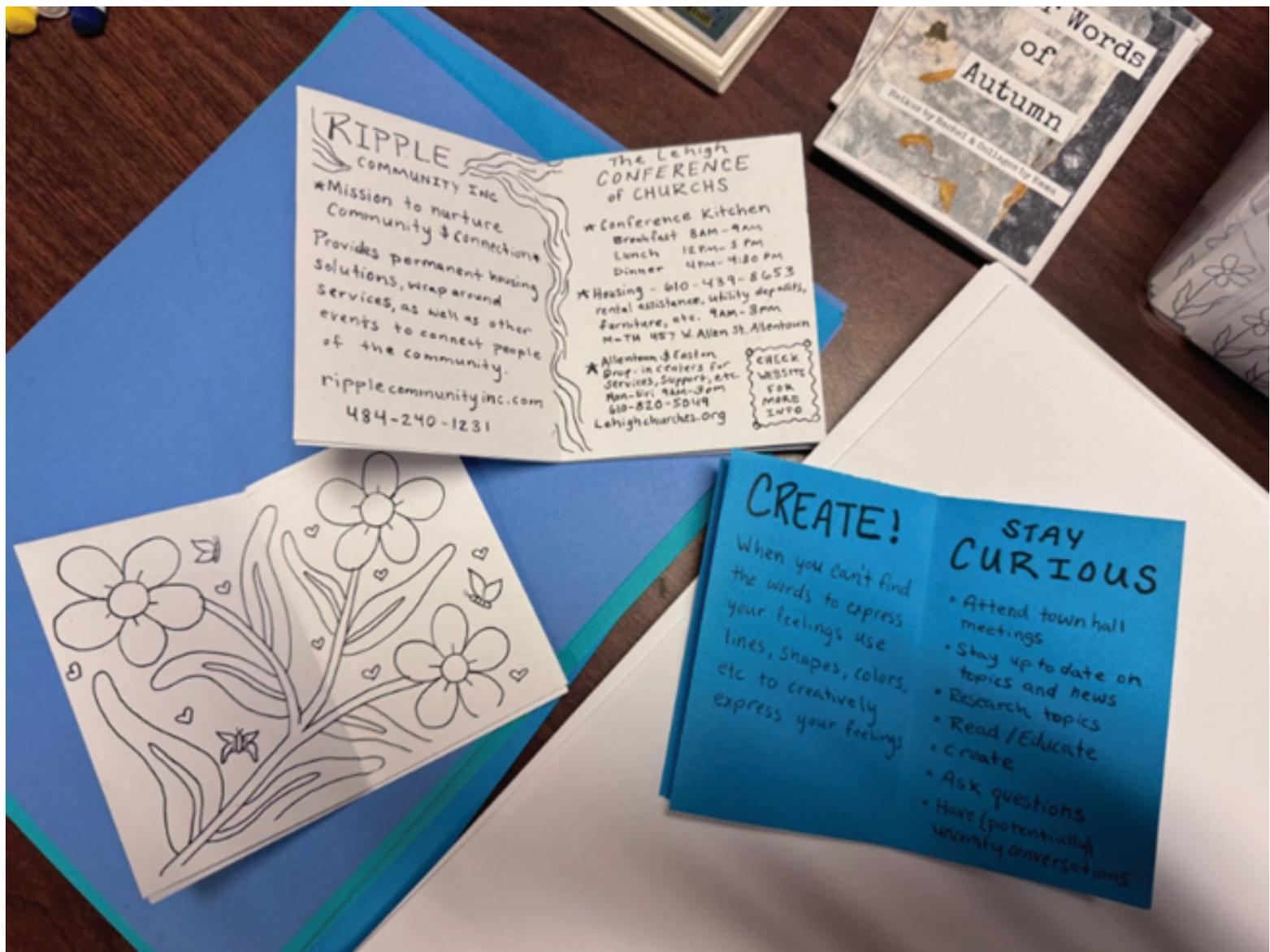
“Despite the baseless, heinous opinions of the Secretary of Health, I am autistic, and I lead a life full of love, art, and purpose,” they performed. “I am autistic, and I am worthy of existence.”

In an interview before the performance, Mateo said ICE activity in the region is growing closer.

“We’ve seen ICE sightings in a general sense, but we’re gonna see them run rampant in the New York and Philly areas,” they said. “We’re in between both of that. They’re gonna close in.”

They pointed to the Trump administration’s recent \$87.4 million purchase of a warehouse in Upper Bern Township in Berks County, about 45 miles northwest of Allentown, for possible use as an ICE processing facility. Bucks County commissioners, meanwhile, voted unanimously Wednesday to oppose ICE establishing detention centers in warehouses within their county after receiving reports that the agency had been scouting locations in Bensalem and Middletown townships.

Emma Ryan, 28, approached the evening’s theme from a different angle. An art teacher by day, Ryan set up a zine-making station where attendees could pick up handmade booklets filled with Lehigh Valley community resources and tips for “little acts of resistance.” Others could make their own zines to take or swap.



Zines containing Lehigh Valley community resources and tips for acts of resistance, made by Emma Ryan, are displayed at "ICE BREAKER," a political art show at the Alternative Gallery in Allentown, Pa., Wednesday, Feb. 18, 2026. (Jai Smith/Lehigh Daily)

"Zines are just a really powerful way to create and replicate materials to share with your community," Ryan said, "whether those materials are for fun or just making art, or if they're to share information that can be helpful to the people who need support."

Ryan, originally from Northern Virginia, moved to the Lehigh Valley in 2016 to attend Cedar Crest College and later earned a master's degree from Kutztown University. She has an upcoming workshop at the Lehigh University Art Gallery focused on the history of zines as tools for resistance and grassroots information-sharing.

Not everyone at the gallery Wednesday was displaying or performing. Ryan Perna, a poet from Nazareth, came to support Mateo, whom he met through Inkwell, a local poetry community. Perna, who is neurodivergent, said he began performing poetry just five months ago but has already read at venues across the Lehigh Valley, including Inkwell, Book and Puppet, Lafayette Park and poetry slams in Reading.

He said his political awakening came in 2015, when then-candidate Donald Trump mocked a reporter with a disability on national television.

“That’s when I just developed a completely unfair type of look on political oppositions,” Perna said. He described his work as exploring an “interconnected web” of issues — neurodivergence, limited access to health care, employment barriers — that compound one another.

Perna, who was born in Bethlehem and raised in Nazareth, said he regularly commutes to the Allentown-Bethlehem-Easton area to find creative community.

“It’s not very diverse up in Nazareth,” he said. “I came to the ABE area because it sort of gives you more of a community to help respect you and accept you.”

He credited Kyle Edwards, the founder of Inkwel, with building the kind of creative infrastructure that makes events like ICE BREAKER possible.

Wunder said he sees art as inseparable from the political moment.

“Art is upstream from culture,” he said. “Art is upstream from politics. By the time politics find out what’s cool, it’s not cool anymore.”

He said he does not expect the gallery’s stance to be universally popular, nor does he expect other organizations to follow suit immediately. But he hopes they will.

“What happens is, once someone does it and shows it’s okay, then they’ll start doing it,” he said. “It becomes trendy. But artists dictate what’s cool.”

For now, the Alternative Gallery is planning its next steps. Wunder said the organization intends to eventually purchase the building it has maintained for more than a decade, securing a permanent home for what he called “a pillar of humanity.”